

I Lived With The Eskimos

by
Sydney R Montague

Chapter Five - Never A Dull Moment

It seemed I was never to reach a station in the Mackenzie, although I volunteered twice for a stretch of two years in that great area, for Edmonton is the headquarters for the district. The idea of the North fascinated me. I was elated when I heard that tentatively I was listed for McRae, but Armstrong and Rhodes went up there and met with tragedy. The detachment home was built of logs, and Constable Rhodes, when lighting the stove, thought to hurry up the blaze by pouring on kerosene. He picked up a can of gasoline by mistake and died as result of the explosion; Armstrong, also in the detachment at the time, was injured and brought out to hospital.

There seemed a chance for the post at Thelon River, even up to the Coppermine, Old Fort Resolution, Bailey Island, Coronation Gulf and Cameron Bay, and yet other men went instead of me. I began to think I was hoodooed, when one weekend I missed getting the Myarling River station by a fluke. One of the men at Edmonton was to be married, with his bride coming in from Luseland, Saskatchewan. The daughter of the Commanding Officer and myself were witnesses at the wedding. That meant dinner and dance at the MacDonald Hotel, and because I was with the CO's daughter I'd left no word where I could be reached during the afternoon and evening for which I had got leave. A man was needed for the Myarling River who could leave early Sunday morning. I was called and could not be found. Jack Garlan was given the special duty, and it was important. Indians had been seen slaughtering wood buffalo on the government preserve, and these depredations had to be stopped. Jack Garland did it, and won praise for his work. I was too smart that time for my own good.

I went up to the hospital to see one of our men who had been *down* the Mackenzie River - up north - and he told me of the natives living there. He told me of the Englishman, Christian, who had died because of wrong eating. Getting short of food, he'd eaten his fur boots and mitts, and refused to follow the native safeguard of eating some decayed meat to act as medicine, the meat supplied to him when at last he was found. My imagination worked overtime dreaming of the unknown things which could be found out in these little known miles of country, and from the little understood natives.

Then Stalworthy and Hall left for the Mackenzie, and we gave them a dinner in celebration. Poor Stalworthy - somehow he'd never met up with tabasco sauce before, so we plied is oysters with it. Stalworthy gulped the mess down and spent the evening drinking cold water to soother his burning tongue and throat.

Kirk and Neilson went up to Fort Norman; Corporal Williams and Sergeant Thorne were on their way to Bailey Island; Brackett and Brockie came out from the North and I heard more stories of the sub-Arctic that fired my desire until I could hardly cover the routine work with patience. Corporal Belcher, now Inspector Belcher at Aklavik, replaced Inspector Caulkin who had been "in" north for many years. It was he, who, when a sergeant, accompanying Inspector French, went over the Arctic ice for two years until they caught and brought to Edmonton for trial the native murderers of Bradford and Street, two American scientists who had been killed through a misunderstanding, for the Eskimos are not often given to violence.

McCormack went to White Horse and Dawson was on patrol to Rampart House. Maybe the officers sensed my desperation at being left behind, and they gave me a special duty chore.

"Montague, report for bringing in a settler stated to be 'acting queer'."

I reported and obeyed, even to doing what I was told in putting a supply of apples, oranges and some bananas in my saddlebags. I wondered if the officials were not as "queer" as the chap I was to go after; but it did not take me long to find out that my superiors had more sense than I gave them credit for. You see, they knew what turn the mental trouble had taken in the poor homesteader, and they took care not to tell me right out.

The settler's place was not so far out from the city - maybe fifty miles - but his half-cleared quarter-section was in a desolate spot. I don't suppose he'd seen another human being in six months, and not half a dozen all told in the five or six years he had been there. Maybe he had not even seen the man who had passed the outskirts of his homestead and reported queer behavior on the man's part.

I rode up, reined in Guts, called and got no answer. There was a miserable cow, stark and starved looking, which stood by a lean-to shed. She looked round and the poor thing moaned rather than lowed. A few skinny hens fled clucking as I approached; the body of a dog lay stretched dead by the cabin doorsill. I dismounted, loosened my revolver and took a cautious step over the dog. There was nothing in the front part of the cabin but dirt and filth, and an unwashed pan

thick with grease which lay upon a packing case upturned to serve as table. It was a miserable hovel.

"Hey," I hailed again, for I could hear a chattering, gabbling sound.

"Hey!"

I knew the man I was after was a foreigner who came from somewhere in the south of Europe, I had been told; but now I spoke in French, thinking he might not understand my English. The noise came from the back of the cabin, and I lighted a match to see into the darkness of the windowless place. There was a man in the bunk. He chattered and squealed and darted up and down on all fours. He thought he was an ape. It was an awful thing.

"Here," I said, "come here. I'm a friend, I've come to help you." But he drew back the lips of his hairy face and snarled a bit.

I thought, "Whatever shall I do?" The poor fellow, I really felt badly for him.

Then the wisdom of my officers struck me. They'd known of this mania of the man, hence the apples, the oranges and the bananas. Perhaps I could entice him with offers of those; then when fed, cleaned up and attended to in hospital, the man might retrieve his tortured memory, and become sane, healthy and happy again.

"We've got a job," I said to Guts as I stepped over that poor, dreadful dog, and went back where I'd left Guts standing. He was uneasy, and I knew why.

"All right, old man, we're going to do things round here." I found a spade and dug a shallow grave for the faithful tyke which had guarded his unhappy master. Then I watered the wretched cow and fetched her the few straggling wisps of hay I could find in the lean-to. But the man proved too much for me alone. I mounted Guts and headed for the next settlement where I knew the homesteader, who had a horse and wagon. The quicker we got that poor chap to Edmonton hospital the better.

The homesteader was willing to help and we returned to the farm as the long twilight of the northern summer was darkening from dusky blue to purple. A shaft of setting sun lit up the cabin. I took the fruit from the saddlebags and went to the doorway in the path of the sun. The man who thought he was an ape caught a glint of light on the golden fruit. He came forward like a shy animal. His eyes were sad and gentle, and he looked at me with a puzzled frown. My heart was

full of pity that loneliness should have driven anyone to this state, and there flashed through my mind thanks that reading interested me, that a whole world of new interests could open up to me just in a page of one book. I was thankful I'd been to school, and had been taught to see something wonderful and interesting in Nature. I scolded myself for the ungrateful thoughts I'd had, and the discontentment for not being chosen to go down the Mackenzie.

And all this while the man was looking from the orange in my right hand to the apple in my left. He was trying to make up his mind which to take; I put the two kinds of fruit on the packing case. He chose the orange and ate it, skin and all. I moved back toward the wagon, taking an apple from my pocket and another orange, holding them so the sun caught their color, and the poor creature followed me into the outer air. The man must have been near starvation. We hoisted him into the wagon; he ate more and then he slept. Guts trotted by the wagon side.

It may have been the result of seeing so many people near him, for when the man came to the barracks he turned violent and had to be put into a cell. He kept climbing up and down the barred door and begging for more oranges, until we fetched the doctor and he could be given soothing medicine.

And then the break came in my favor. I was scheduled for training to be one of the Arctic draft assigned to the northeastern sector of the country. My friend and comrade, Henry George Nichols, whom everyone called Nick, was the only other man chosen from the Edmonton detachment. I was fairly crazy with excitement. This was a thousand times better than anything I had anticipated. I took out the maps and conned over the stretches of the Northwest Territories, which is the general name given that part of the sub-Arctic and Arctic America which reaches from the valley of the Mackenzie in the west to Hudson Bay on the east, and from the timber line on the south above the fairly settled and named provinces north to the Arctic Coast. It has all been seen by explorers, scientists and police on patrol, but little is really known of this country as yet, and of its tremendous possibilities. It is all something new for the pioneers of tomorrow. The very names of the places are full of fascination, and I suppose there's a story back of each one. There's Mackenzie, and beyond that Banks Island, Victoria Island, Melville Island, Prince of Wales Island, Somerset Island, Cockburn Island, Southampton Island, Fox Land and Baffin Land, the edges of the last being where I was to live and work. There is Keewatin, that stretches far up north of Manitoba and rims one side of Hudson Bay with its four thousand square miles of water and its three months open to shipping in the twelve of each year.

"Three or four months training at Ottawa first," said Nick, as we talked our orders over, "then thirteen days aboard a Hudson's Bay steamship from Montreal down the St. Lawrence; then to nose through the Straits of Belle Isle, along the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador. We'll turn the corner up top there, and at the entrance to the Strait just by Ungava Bay there's an island. It's called Port Burwell, and there's never been a police post on it before - that's where we're going to build one and establish a detachment."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"That's be telling," said Nick; but that was exactly the way things turned out. We did have training at Ottawa, and hard, concentrated work it was. It was thirteen days from Montreal to our destination, although it had not seemed to be so far to me on the map. I was to find out there was a whole heap of things I did not know.

"There'll be nothing there but a bunch of Eskimos," I said, and put a question mark into the tone of my voice.

"That's right," said Nick, " and this is the first time this tribe will have had the police in residence, but there's a trader either on the island or not far in on the mainland."

And in Port Burwell, thirteen days after we had left Montreal, we found this trader, a remarkable man with a romantic story. He was the only person in sight as the *SS Bay Rupert* hove to and dropped anchor, and the small boats went overside to take the landing party to the beach.

I thought I was arriving on the most deserted sector of the moon. There were patches of snow and gray rocks, and nothing else as far as the eye could see. A jetty of patched planks jutted from the curving shore line of the small harbor, which was enclosed by two jutting headlands. The harbor looked as though it might be sheltered from the worst of winter storms, but we were to find out differently, for those headlands seemed but to serve as the mouthpiece of a wind chute that started far up a ravine which looked as though it cut the island in half.

It was summer, the only time boats can get in close to land in this part of Hudson Strait. I stood with one foot on the jetty and the other on the edge of the dory which had brought us to land, and I looked around me for igloos. I was terribly disappointed, for there was not an igloo to be seen. The natives of the far West do not build igloos except the very few who travel beyond the timber line, although Sergeant Caulkin had told me he had seen igloo dwellers. But away to

the left as I faced land, I saw a row of broken-down square topped tents, not as big as a decent pup tent.

"Those are the summer homes of the Eskimo settlement," said the trader who had come up and greeted us.

"I'm Wesley Ord," he added, "the Hudson's Bay man here. You're sure very welcome."

He was a thickset man, blue eyes glinting with pleasure at welcoming other white men. Ord had a story I was to hear later which makes him one of the romantic figures of the North. He was from Labrador, but no one knew how he had come there. Missionaries had found him as a white child among the natives, and as far as could be learned he had been a baby aboard some wrecked northern trading vessel. The Eskimos, who count all children as belonging to the tribe, accepted this little fellow as their own. He was cared for by one of the native women, and grew with the Eskimo children; and then the missionaries who had arrived in the interval took the young boy to their school, gave him his name and educated him. The boy was quick, learned English as though it were his natural tongue, as it may have been, and already knowing the unwritten sounds of the Eskimo speech he became a valuable man in the trading world.

"Aren't there any natives?" I asked him.

"Sure," he said, "about fifty of them; there's an eye at every peephole in those sealskin tents. They're watching and sizing you up. I'll not interfere - you represent the law here, and so you give the orders when the natives do appear. I'll interpret for you. They'll realize who are the masters quickly. They've visited where there are police posts in other districts although this is to be the first on Port Burwell."

The lash boats were coming landward now, and Nick and I looked about for suitable places to heap up the goods. These lash boats are made by laying broad platforms across a couple or rowboats or dories fitted with outboard motors. They can carry an immense quantity of goods on each trip, and our supplies were tremendous. It was hardly believable that two men would need so much to establish comfort, but that's what civilization does to us. I could live, and frequently did for months on end, with the natives in their igloos and snow shelters, but it was mighty nice to come back to the wooden square-sided house that Nick and I constructed from the prepared lumber the lash boats were now bringing inland.

There was the lumber for the building, tar paper, floor boarding, joists and staples, lengths of timber beams cut for the roof, shingles, cans of paint and kegs of tar. Nails and screws, hammers and saws, planes, brushes and picks. Our cookstove and the piping for it; our furnishings of chairs, tables, beds and mattresses; not to mention the kitchen equipment of pots and kettles, pans and bake tins and food supplies for a year. Cans of kerosene, coal in sacks, and cans of gasoline for our police boats, which was equipped with a particularly fine type of marine engine. The intensive training of our months in Ottawa before sailing north was to be put to the test. If you can run a motor boat, you can run a sewing machine, our superior officers figured, and the government provided a machine; if you can be a carpenter and joiner you can be a barber, or you can mend a broken leg if need arises. Nick and I had working knowledge of almost everything that makes for living, and whatever one could be expert in doing came to be his job, while the other did something else equally well. Nick always set the dough and made the loaves of bread, while he had much too heavy a hand for pastry, which I rolled and shaped into pies. Good pies they were, too.